

Michelle Park Steel proud of Korean heritage

By Victoria Cook, *The Korean Herald* - January 5, 2007

During November's midterm elections in the United States, Michelle Park Steel became the highest-ranking elected Korean-American politician by gaining a seat on California's powerful Board of Equalization. As part of the BOE, Steel will become one of four elected members in charge of tax administration for the entire state of California.

Like many Korean-Americans in the United States, Steel, 51, has struggled to adapt to her new country while still maintaining her Korean roots. But by joining in the political affairs of the United States she found a solution.

In the aftermath of the L.A. riots, as the Korean community worked to repair their looted shops and their image among the American public, Steel discovered a new purpose for her life. Steel, a Korean who immigrated to the United States in 1974 to attend Pepperdine University, was a full-time mom when the riots began in April 1992. But her close ties to the Korean community in California, her ability to speak English and her educational background motivated her to get out and help.

"The Korean-American community was victimized by the riots and then by the media. I helped them and told them what to say and they did. I was so proud," said Steel, who helped create advocacy groups for many of the business owners attacked during the violent demonstrations. "I thought, I can't stay a housewife anymore, I must keep helping."

But even though Steel's determination to help her community was strong, her apprehension about entering the political arena was equally so. In the United States many politicians are often groomed for their positions by being born into a politically active family or getting involved in politics at a young age. As a first-generation American, Steel had to learn the customs and laws of her new country as well as struggle with the fact that English is her third language after Korean and Japanese.

"It was very tough. I was running against four white guys. I don't have anything against white guys, my husband is one, but I'm a minority and English isn't my first language and it was tough for me to speak because I have an accent," Steel said about her campaign.

"I was raised in Asia with this idea of modesty. But that's not how it is in America. In America you have to say 'this is mine.' And I did it. It was fun but hard work."

One of her biggest advantages in making this venture was her husband, Shawn Steel. As a lawyer and active Republican politician who had served as a speechwriter for former President Ronald Reagan and later as chair for the California Republican Party, Shawn Steel was well-versed in political affairs. He helped Steel get appointed to the Los Angeles Airport and Fire Commissions in the 1990s. And together they became strong supporters of the Republican Party.

Another benefit was the support of the Korean community in California. "I'm so proud of my Korean heritage," said Steel. "Without the support of the Korean-American community I would never have come this far. They are such hard-working people and such a tight community."

When Steel and her family immigrated to the United States in the 1970s, her mother opened a clothing store in downtown Los Angeles. But after years of working long shifts seven days a week, she decided to close the shop and open a small restaurant that would give her more free time. After the shop closed, a representative from the BOE came and said Steel's mother had to pay extra taxes - a penalty Steel said she didn't deserve. Unfortunately, because her mother was unfamiliar with the tax system in the United States, she was forced to pay the large fee.

Steel never forgot this difficult episode her mother went through and how vulnerable immigrants are. So, when Steel's husband suggested she run for a seat on the BOE, she leaped at the chance.

"I had a passion to help the Asian community and especially the Korean-American community since 35 percent of Koreans own small businesses in California," said Steel.

Steel continues to help out that community in many ways. Some of her positions include being a commentator on Radio Seoul, a Korean language radio station in Los Angeles, a member of the Korean-American Community Commission, and a former Commissioner on the President's Advisory Commission on Asian-Americans. And as a member of the BOE, Steel plans to support the same values that the Korean-American community does including education, fighting crime and improving the economy.

"I was so lucky to win but a big reason was that the Korean-American community backed me up and supported me," said Steel. "We worked so hard and we did it. When you work hard you'll succeed, that's America."